



**SPECIAL ASSESSMENT**

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## **Asia-Pacific Responses to U.S. Security Policies**

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# **Still Great Mates: Australia's Response to U.S. Security Policies**

**ANTHONY L. SMITH**

## **Executive Summary**

- In the Asia-Pacific region, the Australia-U.S. relationship is clearly the closest. This partnership, which dates back to WWII, and has not been seriously disrupted since, can be described as a “special relationship” which is akin to the relationship between the UK and the United States.
- History is not the only tie that binds Australia to the United States. Canberra has made a strategic calculation that it can greatly enhance Australia's national security through an alliance with the United States. This strategic calculus has remained consistent across successive Australian national governments.
- The present Australian government, under Prime Minister John Howard, is in broad agreement with U.S. security policy. Both countries have international terrorism at the top of their security agenda, particularly after the Bali bombings in September 2002 which took 88 Australian lives.
- The Howard administration also supports U.S. action against Iraq. Although Australia was reluctant to commit publicly to the possibility of military action without United Nations' (UN) approval, a break down of the UN process on Iraq has led to Australia's decision to back President Bush's ultimatum. Possible war in Iraq has sparked enormous controversy within Australia about the Howard administration's seemingly unquestioning support for the Bush administration.
- Although Prime Minister Howard faces strong domestic opposition, it will not have any impact on Australia's relationship with the U.S. in the long-run. The opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP), were it to be in office, would maintain the alliance with the United States with only minor differences.
- Important divergences between Australia and the U.S. involve multilateralism and international regimes. As a middle power, Australia is far more enthusiastic than the U.S. generally about the value of multilateralism. Though the Bush administration has been something of a late convert to the utility of multilateralism — primarily as a way of forging cooperation against international terrorism, it has focused more on “coalitions of the willing” to take action against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Iraq. Australia also strongly supports international non-proliferation regimes and other global treaties about which the Bush administration is more wary.

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## AUSTRALIA-U.S. RELATIONS: THE OTHER SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

**S**ince the trauma of the Pacific War, Australia has maintained a close alliance relationship with the United States transcending the passage of time and changes of government. Australia, which once looked to the U.S. to fill the void left by Britain's global retreat, now views its "special relationship" with the U.S. as the cornerstone of its foreign relations and position in the world — a relationship that is as close as the "special relationship between" the United States and the United Kingdom. During the Cold War, Australia helped return the provision of U.S. support by keeping the entire South Pacific in the western camp, and by paying its "insurance dues" by going to war in Korea and Vietnam.

Australia assesses that not only is American preeminence a defining factor in international politics and the Asia-Pacific region for the foreseeable future, but that America's hegemony is highly desirable for regional stability. Australia, under Prime Minister John Howard's Liberal-National coalition government, has accepted almost all of America's key policy directions such as the war on terrorism, reining in Iraq, controlling Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) proliferation, and the construction of a missile defense shield (which could be partly based in Australia itself). Despite the objections of many domestic critics about what they see as simply knee-jerk support for the Bush administration's policies, the Australian government has determined a strong overlap between Australia's national interest and U.S. foreign and security policies. Both Australia and the U.S. have placed the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) at the forefront of security considerations, and Australia had invoked the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, and the United States) Treaty after September 11 for the first time in the treaty's history. The Bali nightclub bombing of October 12, 2002, in which 88 Australians died, inflicted the same sort of trauma on Australia as the terror attacks of September 11 did on the United States, and reinforced Australia's support to U.S. anti-terrorism efforts.

Nonetheless, Prime Minister Howard faces mounting criticism from parliament and society that his policies, especially on Iraq, are constructed in deference to Washington without due consideration to Australian national interest. Domestic opponents also charge the Howard government with choosing relations with the U.S. over and above relations with "Asia." Domestic opposition will not, however, de-rail the Australia-U.S. alliance.

Though in overwhelming agreement with the U.S. on security policies, there are minor policy differences, notably on Australia's commitment to multilateralism, and specifically Canberra's attempts to get the U.S. to sign up to various agreements that would further control the proliferation of WMD. Australia has also lobbied the U.S. to agree to tighter controls on small arms, a ban on landmines, the establishment of an International Criminal Court (ICC), and adherence to the Kyoto Protocol.

## THE U.S. PRESENCE IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC: LONG LIVE THE HEGEMON

**E**ven though Australia is geographically distant from the world's major flashpoints, it still has a strong sense of vulnerability to threats from the north; a hangover from its near occupation by Imperial Japan during WWII. For reasons of geography, history, and cultural familiarity, but most of all out of national interest, Australia has sought protection from the U.S. since the onset of the Pacific War, and formally through the formation of the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand and the United States) pact in 1951. Australia backed up the U.S. containment policy in Southeast Asia as part of Canberra's "forward defence"

strategy, even sending troops to Vietnam (a war in which erstwhile protector, Britain, refused to involve itself).

Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) major policy document, entitled *Advancing the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper* (2003), is unequivocal in its embrace of the alliance with the United States:

*The depth of security, economic and political ties that we have with the United States makes this a vital relationship. No other country can match the United States' global reach in international affairs. Further strengthening Australia's ability to influence and work with the United States is essential for advancing our national interests. Even when US actions do not suit our interests, our strong ties mean that we are better placed to put our views to Washington and that the United States will listen to them.*

Australian policy makers, at least as reflected in the official documents, anticipate that the United States will be the sole superpower for the foreseeable future, despite describing China's growing power as the "single most important trend in the region." Yet it is clear that the continuance of U.S. preeminence is precisely what Canberra would prefer. There is no question that Australia wants the U.S. to remain strategically committed and present in the Asia-Pacific region.

## **LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION**

**D**espite the congruence of interests and policies between Australia and the U.S., geography necessarily generates some different threat perceptions. For example, the Department of Defence white paper, *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2003*, makes the apposite point that Indonesia will remain of enduring strategic significance to Australia. Australian officials view their country's geographic location in the Asia-Pacific region as well as its political and economic integration with the region as an asset in relations with both Europe and the United States.

The Howard administration has been criticized heavily by domestic opponents for choosing relations with the U.S. over and above relations with Asia — although such critics make the erroneous judgement that the two are mutually exclusive. (Stronger relations with the U.S. will, for example, go down well in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore and other regional states.) Rather than any real shift in Australian policy *vis-à-vis* Asia with the emergence of the Howard government, as alleged by many Australian pundits, there is little discernible difference between the current government and the previous Keating administration — except in the realm of political rhetoric. Where former prime minister Paul Keating once described himself as the leader of an Asian nation, the Howard government stresses that Australia is a western society that seeks "engagement" with Asia. Yet it is Howard's rhetoric on relations with the region and the United States that has sometimes harmed Australia. A press report (erroneous as it turns out) that Howard had said that Australia was America's deputy-sheriff in the Asian region — with all the imagery of the Wild West that such a statement conveyed — was reported throughout Asia and is still widely quoted to this day. Howard's own announcement of a preemption doctrine similar to that of the U.S. also got him into

hot water in various Asian capitals. However, ultimately Australia will be able to maintain a close relationship with the United States while being integrated with much of Asia. Moving away from the United States is hardly going to assist in the recovery of the one relationship with Asia that has suffered since 1999, that of Indonesia.

One case in which Australia has taken extreme care not to allow its alliance with the U.S. to interfere with its integration with Asia is in its relationship with China. Australia has sought to remain equidistant from problems in U.S.-PRC relations such as the Cross-Straits issue or the Bush administration's early description of China as a "strategic competitor." While there can be little doubt that in the event of serious crisis in U.S.-PRC relations Australia would side with the U.S., in a period of relative peace Australia sees it in its interest to retain consistently cordial relations with China.

## RESPONDING TO TERRORISM

**A**ustralia's defense and foreign affairs white papers make clear that perceptions of a conventional military threat against Australia have declined, while the threat of terrorism, combined with the potential proliferation of WMD, constitutes the leading security threat. Minister of Defence Senator Robert Hill stated: "We believe that this terrorism is strategically focussed with the objective of rolling back Western values, engagement and influence and to weaken and ultimately supplant moderate Islamic governments." Like the position of the United States and Great Britain, the official Australian position is that Islam is essentially a tolerant faith and that the struggle against terrorists is not against Muslims.

Australia's decision to invoke the ANZUS Treaty after September 11 was tantamount to saying that the attack was also against Australia. Australia was virtually alone in the world when it endorsed the Bush administration's so-called "Axis of Evil" speech in January 2002, in which President Bush cited Iraq, Iran and North Korea as the three principal countries of threat to the global order. As further recent demonstration of the Australian government's close support for U.S. strategies and tactics in the war on terrorism, Prime Minister Howard even took the step of praising the President of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, during question time in the Australian parliament: "I do not think there is a world leader who has put more on the line ... than General Musharraf. I regard his personal courage and leadership on this issue as having been quite outstanding." This statement was quite controversial in Australia given the manner in which General Musharraf took and has retained power in Pakistan. In addition to rhetorical and diplomatic support, the Australian government made a major contribution to the campaign in Afghanistan, sending 1500 Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel, including a Special Air Service detachment, sea and air lift capability, two frigates, four F/A-18 fighter aircraft and Orion maritime patrol aircraft.

The subsequent Bali blast in September 2002, aimed primarily at Australian tourists, has brought home to Australia that it too is a target for terrorism. For Australia, given its geographical proximity, Southeast Asia is not the "second front" in the GWOT, but the region of overriding concern. The *Defence Update 2003* notes that Australia and Southeast Asian governments have discovered "that regional extremist networks are larger, more capable and more active than we had believed", while *Advancing the National Interest* expresses concern that "[i]n several areas militant Islam has become entwined with separatist ambitions." The Howard government rejects any notion that the blast in Bali was

a response to Australian support for U.S. foreign policy, claiming instead that Australians are target because of the values they represent. (In fact, evidence now indicates that the bombers were angry with Australia largely because of its perceived involvement in events in East Timor.)

Like the U.S., Australia is now facing the reality that its prime security threat is to the physical well-being of its citizens either at home or abroad. The recent white papers make clear that the large number of Australians overseas (with 45,000 in Southeast Asia alone) creates vulnerabilities. The Australian response to these threats has been two-fold: military contributions to U.S. and other anti-terrorism efforts combined with attempts to establish “capacity building assistance” to the wider region. Australia has also sought to build closer diplomatic and intelligence ties with countries, especially in Southeast Asia.

## **PREEMPTION AND THE 'SON OF PREEMPTION'**

**T**he Howard administration had spoken of the need to obtain UN approval for any military action against Iraq, but the break down of the UN process means that Australia will ultimately back the United States in a “unilateral” intervention in Iraq. Australia has stationed in the Middle East, *inter alia*, a squadron of 14 F/A-18s, 3 C130 Hercules transport aircraft, two frigates, and an SAS squadron. Evidence emerged in February 2003 in the form of a leaked conversation between Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and the New Zealand High Commissioner in Canberra, Kate Lackey, that the Australian government would not draw down its forces if the UN process to gain approval for military action collapsed. Australia will now fight alongside the U.S. without UN backing.

Australia has talked tough on the subject of Iraq, and maintains that the international community has been “too trusting” in its dealings with Saddam Hussein. The main justification that Prime Minister Howard has given the Australian people for action against Iraq is the likely link, present or future, between Saddam and international terrorism. His opening line in a February 4, 2003 statement on Iraq to the House of Representatives was as follows: “The ultimate nightmare for us all must be that weapons of mass destruction fall into the hands of terrorists.” Prime Minister Howard has failed to convince the majority of his public, however, that Iraq constitutes a real danger to the global order. The government was also seriously embarrassed when a senior intelligence analyst resigned his post, calling the government’s policy on Iraq “dumb.” and revealing that Australia’s Office of National Assessments (ONA) did not have any evidence linking Saddam to international terrorism. The official also charged that the United States was withholding critical information on Iraq from Australia; a particularly damaging allegations for an Australian Prime Minister under criticism for excessive agreement with the Bush administration’s security policies. Opinion polls show that while only a minority of Australians think that war against Iraq is warranted, a Hawker Britton poll in March showed that 47% of Australians viewed North Korea as Australia’s main security threat (as opposed to 26% who thought Iraq posed the greater menace). Former Australian ALP Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, summed up the opposition view that war against Iraq will be counterproductive: “Osama bin Laden must be down on his knees praying to Allah that Bush goes ahead [and invades Iraq] with Blair and with Howard.” A wide array of church and civic leaders have added their voices to the criticism, while Prime Minister Howard also faces a minor revolt within his own coalition government.

The Australian government not only stands by America's right to preemptively strike at potential security threats, but has announced its own version of the doctrine. In the aftermath of the Bali blast, Prime Minister Howard stated that Australia reserved the right to act preemptively against other countries to root out terrorism and proposed that the UN Charter be amended to allow for this right. These statements vexed leaders in Southeast Asia, including those in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, who assumed that the Australian government had Southeast Asia in mind. The Australian government later tried to defuse tensions by consulting with each of the 10 ASEAN ambassadors and high commissioners to explain that no action would be taken without consultation.

## MULTILATERALISM AND INTERNATIONAL REGIMES: POINTS OF DIVERGENCE

**A**ustralia and the U.S. differ on the importance of multilateralism. As a middle power, Australia places great hopes in international organizations, law and regimes — though not at the expense of a special relationship with the United States. Hence, Australia will support U.S. military action against Iraq absent UN approval, though UN support is strongly preferred. Similarly, Australia has urged Washington to reconsider its objection to the International Criminal Court and the Kyoto Protocol on carbon emissions.

The divergence in emphasis on regimes, treaties and international cooperative efforts may be most pronounced on mechanisms to address the proliferation of WMD. Australia would like to strengthen international non-proliferation regimes even further. For example, Canberra wants Washington to sign the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), help strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), and create better controls on the trade in small arms and approve a ban on landmines. The *Defence Update 2003* suggests a “layered response” to the emerging WMD threat, starting with diplomacy (“at the forefront”), multilateral agreements, intelligence sharing, law enforcement cooperation, and financial and border controls. WMD is listed as a high priority for intelligence agencies and intelligence cooperation. Australia has also spearheaded “the Australia Group” which urges members to control the export of chemical and biological agents, and Australia is active in the Missile Technology Control Regime. Australia has also lobbied the U.S. to resume multilateral arms control talks. However, if such efforts do not succeed, the Australian government would consider multilateral military operations “to prevent the proliferation of WMD.”

In the end, however, Australia will not permit discrepancies on these issues to undermine the fundamental importance it accords to the bilateral alliance with the U.S.

## TRADITIONAL DEFENSE COOPERATION AND NOW MISSILE DEFENSE

**D**efense cooperation is a major component of the bilateral alliance. Australia and the U.S. conduct many joint exercises and the bulk of Australian military *matériel* is purchased from the United States (often at extremely favorable rates). U.S.-Australia defense cooperation also benefits from Australia's own extensive defense relationships with Asia-Pacific countries, including training of training for regional military officers aimed at professionalizing Asia-Pacific militaries.

Beyond traditional defense cooperation, Australia has backed U.S. plans to develop a missile defense shield, and gone further to consider adding this system to its own defense in light of reports that North Korea's Taepodong 2 missile can reach Australia's Northern Territory. The ALP opposition has criticized the plan, saying that it could provoke an arms race in East Asia and South Asia because China may seek to build up its nuclear arsenal in response. Ultimately, Australia's response to U.S. missile defense plans are likely to be shaped by alliance considerations, though threat perceptions will be an important variable.

## **EXPANDING THE DEMOCRATIC CAMP**

**A**dvancing the *National Interest* argues for global economic and political freedoms as important for Australia's ultimate security. In this sense, Australia is on the same page as the United States – perhaps even more forthright. Australia considers itself a vital partner in spreading liberal democracy and liberalism throughout the Asia-Pacific, even claiming that strengthening good governance is now the largest sectoral focus of the Australian official aid program.

## **PROSPECTS FOR THE AUSTRALIA-U.S. RELATIONSHIP**

**B**efore World War II, Australia's most fundamental relationship was with the United Kingdom. This was not just because of ties of kinship, empire, and sentiment, but was based on the strategic calculation that Britain was the preeminent global sea power which could afford the island-continent of Australia protection from the north. After the calamity of WWII, Australia switched its primary alliance to the United States. While both countries continue to share close cultural, political, ideological and strategic affinity, Australia's close alignment to the United States, like the pre-war relationship with Britain, is based on the rational calculation of proximity to the remaining superpower, which helps shape a world order fundamentally conducive to Australia's interests.

In the current security environment, the Howard administration has proven to be a great friend, ally, and supporter of the United States. However, the support of Australian public opinion cannot be taken for granted, and this could place some constraints on the Howard and even future administrations. This would especially be the case if an issue became a subject of government-public opinion divide at election time. The possibility of war in Iraq could be such an issue.

While differences between Australia and the U.S. remain on issues, particularly with regards to multilateralism, Prime Minister Howard recently stated that "no nation is more important to our long-term security than the United States." Public opinion will not fundamentally change this.